

How government mandates on newborn screening can transform infant healthcare

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India has evolved in newborn screening but some areas still are being focused upon for improvement



Over the years, India has left no stone unturned in ending preventable neonatal and child mortality rates. The current status of infant healthcare in India speaks for significantly lower infant and child mortality rates than earlier. India has dropped down in the ranking for infant mortality rates across the globe. Wondering, how's that possible? And what further can help improve these rates? Well, safeguarding of baby's life or improving a baby's life quality in India is possible with timely detection of the health issue and its appropriate, immediate addressal. The 72 hours post childbirth is crucial for both the mother and baby to ensure their overall fitness.

So far, India has made remarkable progress in the quality of infant healthcare with skilled birth attendants, access to essential medicines, functional healthcare facilities, proper nutrition, resolving conflicts and political instability, and special attention to infectious diseases. But still, there have been cases where Indian infant healthcare has failed to save a child's life or allow the child to lead a normal life, potentially because of no mandated newborn screening. This calls for much-needed awareness of newborn screening and how government mandates on newborn screening can help in transforming infant healthcare.

What is Newborn Screening?

Newborn screening (NBS) is an initiative taken up by a pediatric doctor to prevent any disability or health related issues in

children. It involves early detection and timely treatment of medical conditions that can impact the child's long-term health or survival.

How Does Newborn Screening Help?

Newborn Screening works to serve the following:

- **Early Detection of serious or deadly illnesses-** Simple blood tests, often a heel prick, are conducted soon after the baby is born to detect a variety of conditions including congenital hypothyroidism, inborn errors of metabolism, and congenital adrenal hyperplasia.
- **Prompt intervention-** Once the health issue is early identified, the disease progress or associated long-term complications can be avoided with immediate, appropriate treatment.
- **Avoidance of serious health issues-** Early detection and treatment of a health problem can help prevent irreversible, serious complications related to the body's metabolism, mental health, and physical abilities.
- **Reduction in infant mortality rate-** With early detection and treatment of medical conditions, newborn screening can help lower the chances of health related issues in infants and children.

Indian Initiatives in Transforming Infant Healthcare with Newborn Screening

- **Neonatal Early Evaluation Vision (NEEV)-** It is a public sector initiative, with a mission to improve the early detection and intervention of genetic disorders in newborns.
- **India Newborn Action Plan (INAP)-** It focuses on reducing the infant mortality rate by integrating crucial interventions across the continuum of care, from pre-pregnancy to the post-partum period.
- **Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child Health and Adolescent Health Strategy (RMNCH+A) Strategy-** It recognizes the importance of keeping both mother and child health in good condition. It is a holistic approach to improve health outcomes throughout their lives.
- **State-Level Programmes-** Some of the states of the country like Goa, Kerala, and Chandigarh have already implemented newborn screening programs.
- **ICMR Recommendations-** The Indian Council of Medical Research has strongly recommended conducting newborn screening for health issues like congenital adrenal hyperplasia and congenital hypothyroidism.

Challenges in Newborn Screening in India

In several developed countries, newborn screening programs have gained recognition as successful initiatives. India has evolved in newborn screening but some areas still are being focussed upon to improve the status of newborn screening. These include:

- No nationwide mandate for newborn screening as in the US, Europe, China, and other countries
- Lack of awareness and acceptance amongst the people regarding the role of newborn screening in fostering a healthier society and even the lack of implementation of newborn screening programs by healthcare providers
- No mindset that early investment in the NBS program means huge savings on the lifetime cost of caring for a seriously or chronically ill patient and less burden on the country's healthcare system
- Need to raise awareness for the mandate of newborn screening by the legislators, key opinion leaders, and advocacy groups
- Lack of accessibility to infant healthcare in some backward areas of the country
- Some states of India have high infant mortality rates, pointing to the need for a national newborn screening policy to be implemented.

Perks of Mandated Newborn Screening in India

Here's finally how government mandates on newborn screening can transform Infant healthcare in India. The benefits of having nationwide newborn screening include:

- Better health outcomes and more productive lives for the infants
- Significant reduction in infant mortality rates
- Reduced financial burden on managing untreated or serious illnesses with early detection and treatment of conditions for families and society
- Improved public health

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